

YEMEN UNDER ATTACK BY IRANIAN-BACKED HOUTHIS

HEARING BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS

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TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 2015

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2 o'clock p.m., in room 2172 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. The subcommittee will come to order. After recognizing myself and Ranking Member Deutch for 5 minutes, as soon as he shows up, each for our opening statements, I will then recognize other members seeking recognition for 1 minute.

We will then hear from our witness and without objection, Mr. Ambassador, your prepared statements will be made a part of the record. Members may have 5 days in which to insert statements and questions for the record, subject to the length limitation and the rules.

I would like to note for the record that the subcommittee invited the Department of Defense to send an official to testify before us this afternoon, but DoD stated that they were unable to participate at this hearing and declined to come. But we got the better of the deal, because we have you, Mr. Ambassador.

The Chair now recognizes herself for 5 minutes. On September 10th of last year, President Obama announced to the American public his plan to degrade and destroy the terrorist group ISIL. While making his case for America's role in the fight against ISIL, the President highlighted our strategy in Yemen and held it up as a model of success to be emulated in the fight against ISIL. Yet, about a week later, the Iran-backed Houthis seized control of the capital and the government. Despite this, the administration continued to hail our counterterror operations in Yemen as a model for success, even though we effectively had no partner on the ground since President Hadi was forced to flee. But perhaps even more astonishingly, in what could only be described as alarmingly tone deaf and short sighted, when Press Secretary Earnest was asked at a press briefing if this model was still successful after the Yemeni central Government collapsed and the U.S. withdrew all of our personnel including our special forces, he said yes, despite all indications pointing to the contrary.

So where do we stand now? That is the important question. President Hadi was forced to flee. Saudi Arabia has led a coalition

of over 10 Arab nations in Operation Decisive Storm, which so far has consisted of air strikes only, but very well could include ground forces in the near future. Iran feels emboldened in Yemen because of the leverage it has gained over the administration through the nuclear negotiations, but I commend that the Gulf countries, the GCC countries were taking a strong stance against Iran and stepping up to the plate in Yemen. Despite their action, the Houthis actually control more territory now than they did before the Saudi response. Our Embassy is closed. Our personnel have been evacuated and there is no Hadi government to speak of. And al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has taken advantage of the fighting and has capitalized on the deteriorating situation in Yemen, and we have very little visibility into their movements or their actions.

I am concerned that the AQAP, the al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, has gained ground in eastern Yemen and has been left virtually unchecked to recruit and train. Let us not forget that it was AQAP that was responsible for the Paris attacks earlier this year or that it was al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula that was responsible for overtaking a prison last month and releasing several hundreds of prisoners including a senior operative of al-Qaeda.

AQAP's leader is a follower of bin Laden and like bin Laden also seeks to strike Western targets, including right here in our homeland in the United States.

Iran has reportedly dispatched a naval destroyer near Yemen in a game of chicken over one of the most important shipping routes in the Gulf of Aden. This area is a gateway between Europe and the Middle East and Iran must not be allowed to escalate any tensions or attempt to disrupt the shipping lanes.

Yet, we continue to see the administration make the same mistakes it made in Syria. And just like in Syria, today Yemen is in utter chaos in large part due to Iran's antagonism and meddling. But we must learn our lesson from Syria and engage in the Yemeni crisis head on with a comprehensive strategy before it spirals further out of control. There will be no political solution in Yemen based on the GCC initiative or restarting the National Dialogue Conference that collapsed in early 2014 without addressing the underlying issues. The Houthis were reluctant participants in the National Dialogue in Yemen, but it was clear that they had no interest in ceding power over to a centralized government. As a result, they withdrew from the National Dialogue. It collapsed and the Houthis took control of Sana'a and now other areas. So why would the administration think that the circumstances have changed that would allow for a reconciliation to occur?

It is naive and dangerous to believe that a political solution is achievable as long as the Houthis are unwilling to cede their power and as long as Iran continues its support for these fighters, just like it is naive and dangerous to believe that a political solution in Syria is achievable as long as Assad remains in power.

Even more absurd is the fact that Iran, just this morning, has allegedly proposed a peace plan for Yemen. This is the same Iran that continues to use its terrorism tentacles throughout the region to undermine U.S. interests by supplying arms and fighters aimed to further destabilize its neighboring countries.

So today, we hope to hear from the administration that we have a comprehensive plan on how to get to a political solution, rather than just supporting a reconciliation process while also addressing the current gap in our intelligence and counterterror capabilities in Yemen, as well as the deteriorating humanitarian situation. Because if we act in Yemen in the same way that we have acted in Syria, then we are likely going to see the same crisis follow in Yemen, a war with no end in sight, the rise of dangerous terror groups, a dire humanitarian crisis, and Iran's increased power grab in the region.

And with that, I will go to Mr. Connolly for perhaps 1 minute because when Mr. Deutch comes, he will give his 5 minutes.

Mr. Connolly is recognized.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Madam Chairman, and thank you for having the hearing. In listening to the recitation just now of what happened in Yemen and what happened in Syria, one would, I guess, infer or one is meant to infer that it is all the problem and result of policies pursued or not pursued by President Obama and his administration. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The inherent instability in Yemen is not new and it certainly is not unique to the administration currently in power. Yemen is inherently unstable. It has multiple militia forces and jihadist forces at work. Towns have been taken and retaken and transferred. Terrorism and brutality have occurred and we may very well—there are movements to bifurcate the country as it once was.

The instability in the region is not the fault or the responsibility of any administration. Our question really has to be how do we respond when there are no good options? So how do we do the least harm? How do we limit our exposure? How do we try, however indirectly, to effect outcomes positively?

I don't think throwing pot shots at this administration as if it were omnipotent on the world scene, especially in this region, is very helpful. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Mr. Connolly. Mr. Chabot of Ohio.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you, Madam Chair, for holding this hearing. I want to say at the outset that I have an honor flight coming in shortly and I have somebody from Bangladesh back here, the speaker of the House, that I have to meet with, so I am not going to be able to stay for the testimony, but I will have staff here and I will certainly read the testimony.

So, I was chair of this committee a while back and during that time, I went to Yemen, and I think Mr. Connolly is right. There have been problems there for years, but I would argue that they certainly have gotten worse under this administration and you know, it was this administration that claimed that Yemen was a success story and clearly, it has been anything but that.

When we were on our way over there, there was a terrorist attack on a graduation at the military barracks and over 100 new soldiers were murdered by terrorists. So this has been going on for a while, but the problems in Yemen are just incredible. I think the thing that is particularly disturbing is the Iranian involvement there and around the region. Four or five capitals now in the region are controlled by the Iranians. So it is a very dangerous situa-

tion. I look forward to the testimony. Even though I won't be here, I will certainly review that testimony. And thank you for being here, Mr. Ambassador.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Mr. Chabot. And good luck with that honor flight. It is always very emotional. And we will recognize Mr. Deutch after the 1 minute, with his consent. We will go to Mr. Higgins of New York.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, Madam Chair, for holding this important hearing, you know, another trouble spot in a region that has pervasive trouble. There are no good options here for the United States, but obviously we have a great interest in trying to influence stabilization in that region. So I am very curious to hear the thoughts of our distinguished panelists today.

Additionally, it was announced that the U.N. Security Council imposed an arms embargo on the Houthi fighters bent on for control of Yemen and that resolution which is legally binding prohibits the sale of weapons to three named Houthi leaders, its former president, and his son. So I am just kind of curious as to what, if any, impact that resolution will have relative to the dynamic that is going on in Yemen right now. Thank you very much for being here.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, excellent question. Mr. Wilson of South Carolina.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for leadership on this issue.

And Ambassador, I just can't imagine a more extraordinary time for you to be serving as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. And hey, I want you to succeed, but I am obviously very concerned about the Yemeni evacuation, what this means for the security of the United States and our allies. I am obviously concerned about Libya, its dissolution, the murders at Benghazi, with the rise of ISIL, the failure to have a status force agreement with Iraq which leads to destabilization of Iraq, the regime in Iran which has an ideology of death to America, death to Israel. That is their plan. And as they are moving ahead with nuclear capability, also building missiles to include an ICBM which could only be interpreted as a threat to the American people and American families. And then finally, of course, I am very concerned about chaos and civil war in Syria, the purported red line of the President which simply did not have any life and credibility. But hey, I still want you to succeed, and so I look forward to working with Chairwoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen for your success. Thank you.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Mr. Wilson. Mr. Cicilline of Rhode Island.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Madam Chairman, and Ranking Member Deutch for holding this very timely hearing. And thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for being here today.

I think it is safe to say that the quick deterioration of the situation in Yemen took many people here in Washington by surprise. For many years, Yemen was held up as an example of counterterrorism cooperation and it looked as though a political agreement might be achieved in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The United States provided approximately \$900 million in foreign aid to Yemen

since the transition in 2011 to support counterterrorism and political reconciliation, the economy, and humanitarian aid.

Now we face a vastly different landscape and have to revise our assumptions and expectations. Furthermore, we risk being drawn deeply into another Iranian-backed armed conflict in the Middle East.

I would particularly like to hear from the witness, you, Mr. Ambassador, how we might have better detected the oncoming Houthi rebellion, and what, if anything, could have been done to prevent it, what the U.S. role is and should be in the conflict between the parties in Yemen and how we are cooperating with regional partners and what the processes are for a solution to this conflict.

I am also very concerned about the plight of civilians in one of the poorest countries in the world. Its fighting and political chaos has disrupted an already fragile economy, and prevents access to food, water, and medical care and I would like to hear from you what we are doing to alleviate the humanitarian situation. Thank you very much. I look forward to your testimony. I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Excellent questions. Thank you. Dr. Yoho does not need to address the panel now. So we will go to Ms. Meng of New York.

Ms. MENG. Thank you, Chair, and Ranking Member for assembling this hearing, and our distinguished Ambassador for joining us here today.

On January 21st, a fragile power-sharing deal between democratically-elected President Hadi and the Houthi rebel group in Yemen fell apart and the Houthis began seizing control of large portions of Yemen. These actions were troubling because of the Houthis' illegal usurpation of power and their immediate dissolving of the Yemeni Parliament. Besides their complete disregard for democratic principles, the Houthis have very close ties to Iran which is supporting their aggression and seeking to expand its own sphere of influence in the Middle East.

On March 26th, Saudi Arabia and more than 10 Arab partners began air strikes to weaken the Houthi stronghold and reinstate President Hadi to the presidency. While I am in support of Arab solidarity and intervention here, I am deeply concerned about the possibility of a large humanitarian crisis in Yemen and look forward to delving into these issues this afternoon. I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Ms. Meng. Ms. Frankel of Florida.

Ms. FRANKEL. Thank you, Madam Chair, Mr. Ambassador, thank you for being here.

We have heard some of my colleagues here describe Iran's support for the Houthi forces as another Iranian takeover in the region. And so I am going to be—I am interested in your assessment of that, given that the Houthis ruled northern Yemen for nearly a millennium and have been seeking recourse for decades now, with strong ties to the former regime. So I hope that you can put Iran's involvement in Yemen in this broader context, if you would, and just would add to the question what extent does Iran actually control events in Yemen? Is it more than funding, supplies, weapons or are there Iranian forces actually directing action in the country as we have seen in Syria and Iraq? I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much. Thank you, Ms. Frankel. And we were all the warm-up group for our lead guy, Mr. Ted Deutch of Florida.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Madam Chairman, for calling today's hearing and allowing us to address the recent troubling events in Yemen. Deputy Assistant Secretary Feierstein, welcome back. I understand you just returned from the Gulf. We look forward to hearing the administration's assessment of the conflict, its impact on broader regional politics, and what role we should play going forward.

Following the deposition of Yemen's long time autocratic ruler Saleh in 2011, the U.S. supported an inclusive transition process, via national dialogue, into rebuilding the country's political and governmental institutions and bridging gaps between groups that have had a long history of conflict. Yemen's first newly-elected leader, President Hadi, made clear his intentions to cooperate closely with the United States. Hadi's government remained a partner in counterterrorism cooperation and operations. Yemen, the poorest country on the peninsula, needed support from the International Community. The United States has long viewed Yemen as a safe haven for al-Qaeda terrorists and there is alarming potential for recruitment by terrorist groups given the dire economic conditions that they face.

In fact, U.S. Department of Homeland Security considers al-Qaeda and the Arabian Peninsula the affiliate most likely, the al-Qaeda affiliate, most likely to attempt transnational attacks against the United States.

And while the national dialogue was initially viewed as successful, the process concluded in 2014 with several key reforms still not completed, including the drafting of a new constitution. The Hadi government had continued to face deep opposition for Yemen's northern tribes, mainly the Shiite Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. Over the past year, the Houthis in coordination with tribes and military units, still loyal to Saleh, began increasing their territorial control, eventually moving into Sana'a. Saleh had long been thought to have used his existing relationship to undermine the Hadi government.

The Houthis are well trained, well-funded, and experienced fighters, having fought the Yemeni Government and Saudi Arabia in 2009.

Now much has been written by experts and analysts about how deep Iran's connection to the Houthis go. Some argue it is overblown and that while the Houthis welcome Iranian support, they are not an Iranian proxy in the same way as Hezbollah. Others suggest that the United States has not in the past recognized how deep the level of support provided by Iran is or what Iran's real motives are in supporting the Houthis. Perhaps the fullest extent of Iran's involvement remains unknown, but as Secretary Kerry said last week, there are obviously supplies that have been coming from Iran, he said. There are a number of flights every single week that have been flying in. We trace those flights and we know this. We are well aware of the support that Iran has been giving to Yemen and Iran needs to recognize that the United States is not going to stand by while the region is destabilized or while people

engage in overt warfare across lines, international boundaries of other countries.

The most troubling question, I think to examine today, is whether the conflict in Yemen has now become a symptom of a larger power struggle in the Gulf. The Saudi-led military intervention is now in its third week. The U.S. has been providing resources in support to our regional partners, engaged on the ground.

Madam Chairman, I would point out that this is yet another example of why we must act in the closest of security cooperation with our Gulf friends to counter all of Iran's destabilizing activities in the region. And I was pleased to see reports this morning that indicated the United States has stepped up our support inspecting ships bound for Yemen in search of arms.

Similarly, today's 14 to nothing vote by the Security Council to impose an arms embargo on the Houthis is a welcome step and a needed show of unity from the International Community.

Iran is, in turn, responding, sending a flotilla to the Gulf of Aden. And last week on social media, Iran's Supreme Leader personally attacked Saudi Arabia and its defense ministers tweeting "inexperienced youths have taken over the affairs of the state and are replacing dignity with barbarity."

As Members of Congress, we are often asked by our constituents by the U.S. should be involved in what goes on in the Middle East. They tell us the years of conflict won't be solved by U.S. intervention. But Yemen is a clear example of what is in our national interest. We cannot allow groups like al-Qaeda and the Arabian Peninsula which tried to attack the United States in 2009, in 2011, and in 2012, to take advantage of chaos in Yemen. We need the Yemeni Government that is going to be a partner in our counterterrorism and regional security efforts.

And finally, the people of Yemen have long suffered under dire economic conditions. The population has more than quadrupled in the past 30 years. Conflict is only making the humanitarian situation worse. Saudi Arabia is delivering medical and humanitarian supplies, but it is necessary for the International Community to continue to support the people of Yemen. We have seen all too well how quickly humanitarian crises can slip from the front pages of our papers.

Ambassador Feierstein, thank you again for being here. Given that U.S. personnel has been evacuated, we look to you to tell us where U.S. policy toward Yemen currently stands. Will we continue to see increased level of involvement in the Saudi-led intervention? How can the two U.N. Security Council resolutions pertaining to Saleh be enforced? And can there ultimately be a military solution to Yemen's internal crisis. We look forward to your responses and appreciate your being here. I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much, Mr. Deutch, an excellent statement.

And we are so pleased to welcome Ambassador Gerald Feierstein, who is the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. Previously, he served as our Ambassador to Yemen from 2010 to 2013, so he knows this area very well. He has served in several different postings throughout the Middle East, in-

cluding as Deputy Chief of Mission in Islamabad and Deputy Counsel General in Jerusalem.

Thank you for your service, Mr. Ambassador. We look forward to your testimony. And may I point out your lovely fiancé sitting behind you. Welcome. Does she know the hours that you put in every day in your job? She may want to reconsider.

Mr. Ambassador, you are on.

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE GERALD M. FEIERSTEIN,
PRINCIPAL DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, BUREAU OF
NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. Thank you so much, Madam Chairman. Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Deutch, members of the subcommittee, I greatly appreciate this opportunity to come before you today to review recent developments in Yemen and the efforts that the United States is undertaking to support the Government of Yemen under President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Saudi-led coalition of Operation Decisive Storm that is aimed at restoring the legitimate government and restarting the negotiations to find peaceful, political solutions to Yemen's internal conflict.

During the week of April 4th to 11th, I traveled with Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. As part of our consultations, we met with President Hadi and members of his team, the Saudi Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Interior, the Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as other senior Emirati officials in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense and the Omani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and his deputy.

In all of these engagements, we found a broad degree of consistency in their determination to bring operation Decisive Storm to a rapid and successful conclusion, to establish that no party to the internal conflict in Yemen will be able to achieve its objectives through violence and coercion and to set the framework for a return to negotiations leading to a clear, verifiable commitment on the part of all parties to the conflict to implement agreements and complete the political transition on the basis of the GCC initiative, the conclusions of the National Dialogue Conference, and applicable U.N. Security Council resolutions.

There was also a broad agreement among the Yemeni leadership and Yemen's neighbors that Yemen should not be allowed to become a locus for foreign intervention that destabilizes Yemen or threatens the security and stability of Yemen's neighbors and the region at large.

Madam Chairman, as you know, the conflict in Yemen is enormously complicated and has roots that are largely parochial and locally focused. Yemen, the poorest country in the Arab world with a long history of weak central governance, has for many years struggled to meet the needs of its diverse constituencies and address their grievances. Those failures of governance led to the fall of the previous regime in 2011. Reflecting significant engagement by the United States and the International Community, the GCC initiative was put in place to help Yemen transition to a new, more inclusive government that would be responsive to the needs and aspirations of all of Yemen's communities.

The tragedy of the current situation is that the political process that the Yemenis established in 2011 was achieving success and they had reason to believe that it would lead to a more open, democratic, and prosperous nation that was the goal of the Yemeni people. Regrettably, that transition has been sidetracked by the Houthi movement, aided and abetted by Ali Abdallah Saleh and his allies, who decided that they would seek to achieve by force what they had been unable to accomplish at the negotiating table. We hope that it is only a temporary delay.

We remain deeply concerned about Iranian support for the Houthis' military ambitions. To the best of our understanding, the Houthis are not controlled directly by Iran. However, we have seen in recent years significant growth and expansion of Iranian engagement with the Houthis. We believe that Iran sees opportunities with the Houthis to expand its influence in Yemen and threaten Saudi and Gulf Arab interests.

Iran provides financial support, weapons, training, and intelligence to the Houthis. In the weeks and months since the Houthis entered Sana'a and forced the legitimate government first to resign and ultimately to flee from the capital, we have seen a significant expansion of Iranian involvement in Yemen's domestic affairs.

We are also particularly concerned about the ongoing, destabilizing role played by former President Saleh, who since his removal from power in 2011 has actively plotted to undermine President Hadi and the political transition process. Despite U.N. sanctions and international condemnation of his actions, Saleh continues to be one of the primary sources of the chaos in Yemen. We have been working with our Gulf partners in the international community to isolate him and prevent the continuation of his efforts to undermine the peaceful transition. Success in that effort will go a long way to helping Yemen return to a credible political transition process.

Finally, the destabilizing actions of the Houthis and their allies have created conditions that are beneficial to AQAP. The deterioration of the political situation in Yemen has provided new openings for AQAP to regain the ground that is lost in recent years, owing to the efforts of the U.S. and Yemeni Governments to combat it.

Only through a negotiated resolution of the ongoing political conflict can we resume the cooperation with the Government of Yemen to deter, defeat, and ultimately to eliminate the AQAP threat to Yemen, the United States, and our friends and partners around the world.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you this afternoon. I look forward to answering any questions you may have about the situation in Yemen, and our policy responses.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Feierstein follows:]

Statement for the Record
Ambassador Gerald Feierstein
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
April 14, 2015

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the ongoing conflict in Yemen.

On March 26, in response to a direct request from President Hadi, Saudi Arabia and a ten-plus member Arab coalition commenced an air campaign in Yemen to protect the unity, sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Yemen. Saudi Arabia acted only after President Hadi, who had fled to Aden, asked for assistance from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and after it appeared that the Houthis intended to capture Aden.

Saudi Arabia shares a long and porous border with Yemen and has long been clear about the threat that widespread instability and chaos inside Yemen pose to Saudi territory, including through the expansion of extremist groups whose activities may spill over the border. In support of the Saudi-led coalition's efforts, the United States is providing logistical and intelligence support, including through the establishment of a Joint Combined Planning Cell with Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm air strikes against Houthi targets continue. So far, the air campaign has focused on air assets, air defense systems and missile depots, and in some areas has forced Houthi forces into tactical retreats. However, the Houthis, with support from some military units aligned with former President Ali Abdallah Saleh, continue to aggressively push forward in several areas. The number of fighters killed in action continues to mount, and civilian casualties are also increasing.

Although the Houthis and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) are each other's sworn enemies, the destabilizing actions of the Houthis and their allies have created conditions that are beneficial to AQAP, which already has a significant presence in Yemen. Less than two weeks ago, AQAP overran a prison in Yemen's fifth largest city, al-Mukalla, freeing prisoners from a jail, including one of AQAP's senior leaders, Khaled al-Batarfi. Additionally, an ISIL-affiliated faction

has emerged in Yemen. This group claimed responsibility for suicide bombings on two mosques in March, killing at least 100 civilians.

The humanitarian picture is bleak, particularly given the already dire humanitarian conditions in Yemen before the crisis. Mass displacement of local populations is taking place from Aden, Lahj, Sana'a, and Sa'ada as people flee heavy fighting. The risk of large-scale internal displacement of Yemenis across the country is high. Humanitarian organizations are struggling to gain access to populations in need and to bring in additional supplies from outside Yemen. Hospitals – particularly in Aden – are often overwhelmed by casualties and are reliant on dwindling fuel supplies to ensure electricity and access to water and food, and constraining the ability of humanitarian actors to operate within the country. Sanitation at hospitals is becoming a concern. Fuel shortages are threatening access to water. UN partners in Aden estimate water services could soon be cut off unless more fuel is provided to power water pumps. UNICEF warned on April 9 that malnutrition rates could “explode” soon given dwindling food supplies, rising supply prices and difficulties in accessing populations in need. Even prior to the recent violence, sixty percent of Yemenis were in need of humanitarian assistance. These basic humanitarian needs have only increased since the recent violence began.

We do not believe Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners intend to pursue an open-ended campaign. It will in fact be critical that all parties in Yemen, including the Houthis and the government of President Hadi, return as quickly as possible to political negotiations that remain the only viable long-term path to the stability and prosperity that the Yemeni people want and deserve. The United States remains committed to advancing a political transition process in Yemen that is based on the GCC Initiative and National Dialogue Conference outcomes to which we have been one of the largest contributors through our development assistance and diplomatic support. We support a reconciliation process that will create a stable, independent and inclusive government in Yemen which is capable of defending itself from internal and external threats.

I have just returned from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman, where I accompanied Deputy Secretary Blinken in his meetings with senior Gulf and Yemeni officials to map out a political way forward for Yemen. We continue to believe that in addition to regionally-sponsored efforts, UN-brokered talks at a mutually agreed venue remain the best way forward. The fact is, today's conflict in Yemen, often overly simplified as a conflict between Shia and Sunni forces, or a proxy battle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, is really one with roots that are far more parochial and locally focused. Yemen – the poorest country in the Arab world with a long

history of weak central governance – has for many years struggled to meet the needs of its diverse constituencies and address their grievances. Those failures of governance led to the fall of the previous regime in 2011. The GCC initiative was put in place to help Yemen transition to a new, more inclusive government that would be responsive to the needs and aspirations of all Yemen's communities.

The Houthis participated in the key post-2011 Yemeni political processes, including the National Dialogue, and the constitutional drafting committee. They have been provided a place at the table, and it remains open to them. However, their decision to pursue a different path, to seek to overthrow by force the transitional government with help from elements of the former regime, derailed that process, jeopardizing not only the political transition but also the economic welfare and security of the Yemeni people. The United States, the UN Security Council, the GCC, and the G-10 and G-14 groups of countries have all repeatedly and consistently called on them to reverse this approach, and return to negotiations. Any other path is unacceptable.

At the same time, we remain deeply concerned about external support for the Houthis' military ambitions, particularly from Iran. Iran does not control the Houthis; however, we know that the Houthis and Iran have a relationship. Iran is likely looking to take advantage of Houthi international isolation to expand its influence in Yemen. Iran has continued to provide financial support, weapons, and intelligence to the Houthis; this assistance has encouraged their destabilizing activities.

In addition, we are particularly concerned about the ongoing destabilizing role played by former President Saleh, who since his removal from power in 2011 has actively sought to undermine President Hadi and the political transition process. Relying on his network of tribal alliances amassed over three decades in power, it was Saleh who facilitated the Houthi expansion from the northwest in 2014, their takeover of Sana'a and their eventual arrival in Aden. Despite UN sanctions, U.S. sanctions and international condemnation of his actions, Saleh continues to be one of the primary sources of the chaos in Yemen. We have been working with our Gulf partners and the international community to isolate him and encourage him to leave Yemen and cease political activity. The departure of Saleh will go a long way to helping Yemen return to a credible political transition process.

We also remain focused on our counterterrorism objectives. We actively monitor threats emanating from Yemen and have resources and capabilities postured in the area to address them. We will not hesitate to act to protect the homeland from the

terrorist threat. As we have in the past, we will continue to take action to disrupt continuing, imminent threats to U.S. persons. We will continue to apply pressure against AQAP to keep the American people safe. We are also committed to working with our partners in the region and around the world to take the necessary steps to counter Iranian attempts to foment instability in the region.

Our life-saving humanitarian assistance in Yemen is continuing, when and where security allows. Humanitarian assistance programs are administered through grants by State and USAID, and implemented by various UN agencies as well as other international and non-governmental organizations. We also work in close coordination with the ICRC, the World Health Organization, UNHCR, and NGOs to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid, gain access to vulnerable populations, and meet Yemen's immediate needs, which are mainly concentrated in the health, water and sanitation, food security and protection sectors.

Madam Chairman, as you know, as the former Ambassador I have a particular interest in Yemen, and this Committee, in particular, has shared that. My colleague, Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security Greg Starr, and I have had the privilege of briefing you and your staff regularly. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this afternoon. I look forward to sharing more details from my meetings in the region with you all, and answering any questions you may have about the situation in Yemen and our policy responses.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Mr. Ambassador. And you are certainly an expert in this area. I note that it is important to not minimize Iran's role in Yemen or the sectarian nature of this conflict, as I believe the administration seems determined to do. The administration has so far provided only limited logistical support to the Saudi-led coalition. We waited to give them the intelligence that they needed, for example, to know exactly where to hit. The administration is hoping for a political solution without also having our own comprehensive strategy in the region. So we are essentially outsourcing our Yemeni policy to the GCC and Iran, the Gulf countries.

Are we in conversations with Iran or with Houthi rebels about the situation in Yemen? And what is our plan if the Houthis refuse to accept a political resolution?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. Madam Chairman, we believe that the Iranians are well aware of our views and our positions on the situation in Yemen. We have been very clear in articulating that.

As far as the Houthis are concerned, we have expressed an interest in establishing a dialogue with them, going all the way back to frankly the time that I was still in Sana'a. The Houthis, up until now, have declined the opportunity to engage with us directly. Nevertheless, we have been able to communicate with them, to pass messages to them through various intermediaries. And again, I believe that the Houthis are fully aware of our views and the positions that we have taken on their issues going all the way back to the early years of the 21st century.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, sir. You testified that current conditions in Yemen are beneficial to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and that ISIL is an emerging presence in Yemen. How large of a presence does ISIL have in Yemen? What kind of pressure are we applying against them? And now that our Embassy is closed and all of our personnel have been evacuated, our intelligence capabilities have been severely restricted. What kind of intelligence can we collect without a presence in country and what insight do we have into the various factions?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. It is a very good question. In terms of ISIL, it is extremely difficult for us to have a clear picture of the extent to which they are a factor there. As you know, they claim credit for several attacks on mosques earlier this year. This was the first time that ISIL as an entity emerged really in Yemen.

We would still consider AQAP to be by far the larger and more significant threat. We have heard some Yemenis and others speculate that what we are seeing is the return of perhaps of some Yemeni fighters who were in Syria or Iraq who have come back to Yemen and are now operating as ISIL, but I think of that as something that we couldn't confirm at this point.

In terms of the complications in our ability to have a clear picture, there is no doubt that the fact that we are not present in Yemen at this moment and that we aren't able to maintain the level of communications and dialogue and the daily interactions that we were able to have with Yemeni counterparts while we were there and while President Hadi's government was in place, certainly is an obstacle to our ability to continue to conduct operations.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, sir. Now State and DoD have provided a variety of capabilities to Yemeni security forces including some sensitive equipment such as night vision goggles. With the closure of our Embassy and with the relocation of Special Operation Forces from Yemen, it is much more difficult to monitor the use of such equipment. What do we know in the U.S. Government about the current status of the equipment that was previously provided to Yemen? Have they fallen into the hands of Houthis, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or ISIL?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. We haven't seen any direct evidence that those items of equipment that we have provided in the past have been taken by the Houthis or by other elements. There has been some speculation in the press, but we couldn't confirm that. We don't have any independent information.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you. And we have seen reports that coalition forces have amassed along the Saudi-Yemeni border and that some Saudi forces are already on the ground in Yemen. Do you expect to see GCC coalition ground forces in Yemen and what would Egypt's role be in such an effort? What role would the United States play in such a scenario?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. Based on the discussions that we had with our counterparts in Riyadh and in Abu Dhabi last week, I think that at this point in time what we understand is that they don't have any current plans to actually have a ground presence inside of Yemen. They are, are you said, moving forces to the border. We believe that that is largely for defensive purposes. And they are clear that this is something that they would consider if they see the requirement. But right now, we haven't seen anything.

As for the Egyptian role, those discussions are ongoing and there have not been any commitments that we are aware of on the part of Egypt to participate in any kind of ground activity.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you. And lastly, you testified that the humanitarian situation was already dire in Yemen before this crisis and that malnutrition, bad sanitation, no access to water, internal displacements, are all rising internal concerns. What is the U.S. doing to work with Saudi and the rest of the Gulf Council nations to prioritize the transportation of water, essential food, fuel, and humanitarian supplies like medicine into the country and via air and seaports?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. One of the fundamental items in Deputy Secretary Blinken's agenda with our partners in Riyadh and in Abu Dhabi was precisely to encourage them, to urge them, to ensure that humanitarian access to Yemen was possible. I think that the latest information that we have is that the picture has improved somewhat. It remains very serious. Nearly half of the population in Yemen right now, based on the estimates we have seen, is food deprived. So this is a very serious situation.

We are doing a better job, I think, in getting some of the humanitarian supplies, not only food, but also medicines and other essentially humanitarian goods to Yemen. The internal distribution is extremely difficult because of the various military activities that are going on around the country, so the movement has become complicated. And probably the most significant concern that we have right now is the availability of fuel which is essential not only

for the movement of goods and people, but also is essential in order to provide water and also bread because the bakeries run on propane gas and without propane, they can't bake their bread. So this is having ripple effects throughout the economy and making the humanitarian situation that much more serious.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you again for your service, sir.

Mr. Deutch of Florida, the ranking member, is recognized.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Madam Chairman. Mr. Feierstein, you mentioned you just got back from the region and you don't think the Saudis this campaign as an open-ended one. Do they think there is a military solution? You had said they don't have plans to launch a ground war. Do you envision a situation in which Saudi or coalition ground troops would go in?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. Under the current set of circumstances, no. They are looking at various scenarios, but they have been very clear with us that that is not where they want to go. And the history in Yemen is not favorable for foreign ground forces. And I think that the Saudis are well aware of that.

I do believe and based on the conversations that we have, the Saudis do not believe there is a military solution to this conflict. They understand, as we do, that ultimately the only solution is to bring the parties back to the negotiating table and their intent is to try to demonstrate through their current military activities that a military solution on the part of the Houthis or Ali Abdallah Saleh is not achievable, and therefore they need to return to negotiations.

Mr. DEUTCH. There were two, so far anyway, two stories with respect to Iran and Yemen that have arisen today. One reports that Iran may be trying to send surface-to-air missiles to the Houthis and that the United States is stepping up our inspections to ships bound for Yemen. First, on that one, can we expect to see greater U.S. involvement as the conflict drags on?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. I think that at this particular moment our intent is to try to support the Saudi coalition and our partners. And so what we are doing is aimed at empowering, facilitating, enhancing their capacity to take on this mission.

In the situation of the shipping, we will be taking a very careful look at and examining very closely efforts to violate the embargo. Of course, we had the arms embargo that was passed today by the U.N. Security Council, but we also have long standing arms embargo on Iran and any effort on the part of the Iranians to export weapons would be a violation of other U.S. Security Council resolutions. And we will be looking at ways to ensure that that embargo is enforced.

Mr. DEUTCH. And Iran allegedly released some draft of a peace plan today. Can you comment on that?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. Well, I think that the comment we have on that is that it is ironic that the Iranians have put forward a peace plan that encompasses the four points that we were actually trying to implement when the Houthis, with Iranian encouragement, blocked the negotiations and created the humanitarian crisis that we are confronting today. And so I think from our perspective, if the Iranians are serious about their peace plan in the first instance they should stop sending weapons to the Houthis and they

should also give their advice to the Houthis that they should be returning to the peace talks and the negotiating table.

Mr. DEUTCH. That would be sound advice. Mr. Ambassador, has this become or does this risk becoming proxy war for regional influence between the Saudis and the Iranians?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. I think from our perspective, I would say that Yemen is a unique situation for the Saudis, that this is on their border. It represents a threat in a way that no other situation would represent. And while, of course, there is concern in the Gulf and we heard from our partners in the Gulf about the situation in Syria and Iraq and also their concerns about developments in Lebanon and elsewhere in the region, I think our sense is that the perception of the situation in Yemen is different and more threatening.

Mr. DEUTCH. Again, my last question is what do we make of the Iran flotilla that has moved in?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. We are again tracking it. The Iranians, of course, have claimed that they are only there as part of the larger international effort to prevent piracy in the Bab al-Mandeb and the Red Sea. We will be keeping a careful eye on it. We also have significant forces in the area and we will be tracking.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you. Thanks, Madam Chairman.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. They just want to help. They are just misunderstood. Thank you, Mr. Deutch.

Mr. Wilson of South Carolina.

Mr. WILSON. Again, thank you, Mr. Secretary, and I appreciate, too, you and I have something in common in that I have two sons who have served in Iraq. One is a physician and another is field artillery and I know that you have had a son serve there. And then with your background, what a distinguished background, and as I stated from the beginning, I am just so hopeful for your success because I believe, sadly, that as safe havens are created throughout that region and into Central Asia and North Africa, that the American people are at risk. So we want you to succeed and with that in mind, and you referenced that a minute ago and that is what impact do you believe the administration's nuclear negotiations with the regime in Tehran have had with the support of the Iranian Government to be provided to the Houthis?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. Thank you very much, Congressman Wilson, for your kind words. In terms of the relationship or any correlation between the nuclear talks and the situation in Yemen or more broadly in the region, I think that our perspective is that what we have achieved by establishing the framework for an agreement that, of course, we hope is completed by the end of June, that this is something that will contribute to regional security and stability and that certainly one of the things that we discussed with our friends in the region and I think that President Obama, when he meets with the GCC leaders in summit in a few weeks, will also make clear that despite the negotiations on the nuclear account and despite what we hope is an agreement to block any further Iranian effort to acquire a nuclear weapon, nevertheless, the other concerns that we have about Iranian activities including in areas like Yemen have not changed and that we will continue to pursue

aggressively a program of confronting and challenging any Iranian efforts to destabilize the region.

Mr. WILSON. And I see, actually, a direct relationship of the negotiations and what's going on in Yemen and that is untruthfulness. The Iranian regime has indicated that they have no presence, no support, no interest whatever, and then as correctly pointed out, an armada of ships appears off the coast. But with proven untruthfulness, I just can't imagine that we would be placing faith in regard to their now denial of developing a nuclear capability while they are building a missile system. And so do you see the relationship of untruthfulness?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. I think that certainly Iranian behavior merits very close observation and I don't think that it is the intent of the administration to place any faith whatsoever in what the Iranians say. The important thing is to establish a very tight system of verification that would enable us to see if, in fact, the Iranians are cheating or otherwise violating the terms of any agreement that we might reach. So I don't think there is any trust or faith involved in this.

Mr. WILSON. I appreciate your concern there. And what impact do you believe that depletion of Yemen's oil reserves as early as 2017 will have on the Houthi relationship with other nations in the region?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. Well, I think more broadly, of course, one of the issues and one of the things that we as the United States were working on, along with our international partners, was the effort to try to provide Yemen with a foundation for economic development. We recognize that it is the failure of the government to provide for its people, the failure to provide any kind of economic horizon or any optimism for the future is feeding into these issues, not only with the Houthis, but with AQAP and other violent extremist organizations. And so one of the things, as we go forward, not only to try to resolve some of the outstanding political issues, but also to work on these economic issues and to provide for our future. Having spent 3 years in Yemen, I can say that I was always optimistic that given an opportunity, Yemen could actually develop and provide for its people economically. Unfortunately, the political situation, the security situation, have undermined their ability and our ability to really build that kind of a future.

Mr. WILSON. Well, I appreciate your service there. I know it must be very distressing to you to see the current condition, but your service means a lot to the American people. Thank you, and I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Mr. Wilson, and thank you to your family for the valuable contribution to keeping our homeland safe. Thank you. Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Madam Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. First, I would like to ask you as much as you can share in an open setting, would you speak to how the current conflict has impacted our counterterrorism efforts within Yemen? You mentioned in your opening remarks that AQAP is taking advantage of this opportunity and my question really is do we have in place an alternative counterterrorism plan that will continue to disrupt AQAP and ISIS operations? What is the relationship of these

three groups on the ground? Are they coordinating? But during this period of unrest, how are we protecting American security interests?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. It is a challenge. And certainly in the efforts that we have been making over the past several years with the support of President Hadi and his government, a lot of our cooperation or a lot of our effort was dependent on the cooperation that we were receiving from the Yemenis and that really enabled and expanded our ability to act effectively against violent extremist organizations. That, of course, both because we are not physically present in Yemen right now and because of the overall collapse of the Government of Yemen, that kind of cooperation is no longer viable, at least for the moment.

What we are trying to do, of course, is that to the extent possible, we will continue to use our own independent means to gather intelligence and to try to understand what is happening in Yemen, but it is not as effective or efficient as it would otherwise be. And so our effort is really as part of a return to a political negotiation and hopefully the restoration of a legitimate government in Sana'a to be able to resume the kind of cooperation that we had earlier on.

In terms of the interactions of the various extremist organizations, it is very difficult to say. We really don't have much of an understanding of ISIL or what their relationships are, who they are. It is possible, of course, that they are simply people who are using that name because they believe it adds a certain amount of veracity to what they are trying to do. So in the absence again of any kind of presence on the ground or ability to really collect intelligence, it is difficult to say.

Mr. CICILLINE. And Mr. Feierstein, in light of the current situation in Yemen, are there any changes that need to be made to the administration's FY 16 request for Yemen to reflect these realities or to reflect an adjustment in the policy goals for Yemen?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. It is something that we are looking at and I think that we will adjust. I mean, obviously, our hope would be that if we can get the situation stabilized and get the political process going again, that we would be able to return and that we would be able to continue implementing the kinds of programs that we were trying to achieve that are aimed at economic growth and development as well as supporting democratic governance and the opportunity to try to build solid, political foundations for the society. At this particular moment, we can't do that, but it is hard to predict where we might be in 6 months or 9 months from now.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, and Mr. Feierstein, my final question is the United Nations reports that Yemen relies on imports for 90 percent of its staple food and we can surmise that as a result of the conflict that there will be disruption and obviously the World Food Program reports that 10 million people, 42.5 percent of the population were already unable to meet their basic food needs. So would you speak a little bit about what we are doing, what the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is doing to ensure that the food is getting to the right places, that the transportation is being permitted, that medicine is getting in and also are we tracking it? Do we have some oversight to be sure that it is actually getting to the people

who need it because this has all the makings of a catastrophic humanitarian crisis?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. Yes, sir. And again, I think, one, of course, the United States is and has been traditionally the largest donor to World Food Program, UNICEF, other international organizations that are providing humanitarian relief to the Yemeni people and will continue to do that. There has not been any interruption in our support for humanitarian assistance.

Secretary Blinken, during this visit to Riyadh and to Abu Dhabi, had at the top of his agenda urging our partners in the Gulf to ensure that they made accommodations to allow for humanitarian relief supplies to reach Yemen. And our understanding from what we are seeing over these last several days is that, in fact, the flow of humanitarian goods into Yemen has improved. Two ships carrying wheat have arrived at Yemeni ports. ICRC and Médecins Sans Frontières and UNICEF have been able to get relief supplies in by both ship and plane over the last several days. And so we are seeing improvements on that side, but the internal distribution, as you pointed out, the internal distribution remains problematic.

Understand that, for example, truck drivers are very concerned, unwilling to move because of the fighting in the country. There are fuel shortages that complicate that. And so internally, we are still seeing difficulties getting the necessary supplies to the right places. It is something that we are discussing with our partners in the humanitarian community and we will see if we can improve it.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. I yield back, Madam Chairman.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Mr. Cicilline. Mr. Yoho.

Mr. YOHO. Thank you, Madam Chair. Ambassador, is it Feierstein or Feierstein?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. I say Feierstein. My parents said Feierstein.

Mr. YOHO. Well, good. I am satisfying both of you. What warning signs were there present prior to the fall of the Hadi government? What did we see? Did we know this was coming or was this kind of out of the blue?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. The situation with the Houthis has been complicated for a long period of time and we have been in a situation when we had the initial uprising, the political uprising in 2011 and '12, the Houthis were part of the opposition to the Saleh regime. And there was a strong desire on the part of all of the political groups in Yemen to see if they couldn't bring them into the political process. I think there was a broad understanding that the Houthis had legitimate concerns and legitimate grievances about the way they had been treated over the years. And there was a hope that they could be accommodated through the negotiations and through the implementation of the GCC initiative in a way to make them a part of the larger political fabric. And that was really the main effort for a long period of time.

Unfortunately, low-level conflict continued throughout that period between the Houthis and some of the other elements, some of the conservative Sunni elements of the society and that flared up last summer in an area, in the northern part of the country near the traditional Houthi area in a place called—

Mr. YOHO. Let me interject in here. So what you are saying? And I think what I am hearing is the Houthis didn't feel like they were involved sufficiently in the Hadi government. They didn't have enough input? Is that—

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. They weren't technically part of the Hadi government. They didn't have any seats in Hadi government. They were part of the larger political process. They were participants in the National Dialogue Conference and in the implementation of the GCC initiative.

Mr. YOHO. And will Khaled Bahah's appointment as Vice President help be sufficient to satisfy what they are looking for as far as representation? And the other part of that question is does the appointment of Mr. Bahah as Vice President, does that weaken President Hadi's effectiveness if he were to go back into power?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. The appointment of Khaled Bahah as prime minister last September was one of the elements that resolved the first confrontation with the Houthis, last September when they signed an agreement. And they approved the appointment of Khaled Bahah as the prime minister.

Yesterday or the day before yesterday, when he was named as the Vice President, they objected, not because they have any concern about him. He is, I think, somebody who is universally respected inside of Yemen, but because they objected to the process that led to his appointment. But we do think that he is someone who is acceptable to all of the elements of society. We don't think that it would undermine the legitimacy of President Hadi's government. In fact, it accomplishes something that President Hadi had been encouraged to do for a long period of time.

Mr. YOHO. Do you see him with a resolution of this conflict? Do you see President Hadi coming back and running that country?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. I think both the United States and more broadly, the International Community, see that the legitimacy—

Mr. YOHO. They see him as a legitimate President?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN [continuing]. Is still with President Hadi. What exactly the format might be that would bring him back to Sana'a is negotiable. And if there is some other format that would be acceptable to the Yemenis, would be acceptable to us.

Mr. YOHO. And we have known for a long time that the Iranian influence with the Houthis has been there for a long time. Have you seen their interference in this conflict more prevalent than it has been in the past?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. Yes.

Mr. YOHO. You have seen it step up?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. Yes.

Mr. YOHO. Do you have any feeling that there is an increase of that activity due to the Iranian nuclear negotiations that we are going through? Have they been emboldened more?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. We believe that there are a number of factors that are feeding into Iran, a sense that it has the upper hand was because of its engagement elsewhere in the region, because of the weakness or the disarray within the Sunni community, the Iranians may be emboldened. I think our sense is that the Iranian nuclear negotiations would not be a factor.

Mr. YOHO. I find it interesting that the Iranians have stepped up their involvement and have taken over four capitals and we see a big influence of them in Venezuela. All this time when they have been under sanctions and they are supposedly struggling internally, yet we see more influence. In fact, they just purchased that missile defense system from Russia for \$800 million and it doesn't look like a country that is in financial constraints or having difficulties making its presence. I think for them to step forward and show this kind of leadership in that region is certainly not the kind of leadership I want to see. I would think the influence that we have with Saudi Arabia's would be stronger. What are your thoughts on that?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. Well, certainly I think that what we would like to do is see. You know, we have the nuclear agreement now. I think our view is that potentially that could contribute to regional security and stability. Certainly, the support that we are providing to Saudi Arabia and the Saudi coalition and Operation Decisive Storm is an important element and an important opportunity for us to demonstrate to our friends in the region that despite the nuclear negotiations and the framework agreement, our commitment to their security and stability is not affected, and that we will continue to confront and challenge Iranian activity where we see it playing a negative role in the region.

Mr. YOHO. Ambassador Feierstein, I appreciate your time. I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Mr. Yoho. Ms. Meng of New York.

Ms. MENG. Ambassador, I thought that when the campaign started the Saudis were very smart to brand this as a pan-Arab effort. But with the rising of civilian casualties, can you give us a sense of the perspective of this on the Arab street today?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. It varies. And I do believe that broadly on the Arab street that there is a great deal of support for what the coalition is trying to accomplish in a sense that it is appropriate for the Saudis to take a leadership position in confronting Iranian malign intent.

Within Yemen, of course, the situation is a little bit different and the concerns about some of the civilian casualties is obviously, and understandably much higher. We, as one of the elements of our support, and one of the things that we're trying to accomplish in providing support to the international coalition is precisely to help them avoid those kinds of civilian casualties and to ensure that when they are going after a particular target, that they are doing everything possible to make sure that there is no collateral damage.

Ms. MENG. My last question, it appears that Turkey and Pakistan have backed off their initial support for this operation. Can you speak about that and do you foresee this new found Arab coalition working effectively together beyond Yemen?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. I think for Turkey and for Pakistan, the issue is more complicated. I can speak a little bit, am I am more familiar with the situation in Pakistan than in Turkey. But in Pakistan, you have, of course, a long border with Iran, an important relationship between Pakistan and Iran, as well as an impor-

tant and long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia. And so for the Pakistanis, this was probably a situation where they didn't see, frankly, that there was a good way forward for them to participate. They have been very clear in saying that they would be absolutely committed to supporting Saudi Arabia if there were any kind of threat to Saudi Arabia specifically, but in the case of Yemen, a little bit more complicated for them and probably something that politically inside of Pakistan would have been extremely difficult.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much, Ms. Meng. Mr. DeSantis, my wonderful colleague from Florida.

Mr. DESANTIS. Thank you, Madam Chairman. I think this is an important topic. I am going to get to this, but we just got the news over the wire that the President is planning on removing Cuba from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. Now this is something that, although outrageous for us, is something that I think was expected. I think it was baked in the cake. But I think it is really, really troubling when—Cuba hasn't done anything. They have given no concession. They haven't done anything on behalf of their people there. They are arresting more people, repressing more people since we have had this change. They have harbored somebody on the FBI's list of most wanted terrorists. Nothing is being done. This is just a pure, unadulterated concession with absolutely no basis or grounding in facts.

I was happy to lead a special order on the floor last night with some of the post-9/11 veterans who were in Congress and the two countries that we seem to have better relationships with now, Iran and Cuba. The question is what have we received in return for that? Mostly, it is just us giving concessions to these countries. And I think a foreign policy based on the idea that we are going to be dancing with dictators is not a foreign policy that is going to succeed. And I think it is really alienating us from a lot of our allies and tragically, I think, is leaving people who are fighting for freedom in places like Cuba, completely in the lurch. This is not going to be the last that we talk about this, I know, but it is really, really disappointing.

Sorry about that, Ambassador. I know that is not your cup of tea, but it is something that we work on on this committee and I know that the chairwoman especially has done it for a long time.

Did the State Department approve President Obama's remarks in September when he announced the campaign against ISIS and he cited Yemen as a success?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. I am not entirely sure.

Mr. DESANTIS. Because I know there was a lot of discussion back when Bush was President about approving the WMD passages. Is it standard that that goes through State when a President makes a major speech about foreign policy or is it just kind of the State has got to respond to what the White House said? I am just not even clear about how the process normally works.

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. I think as a matter of principle, it is up to the President to decide how he wants to prepare his speeches.

Mr. DESANTIS. Once this statement was made and Yemen was cited as an example of success, were there concerns in the State Department that were raised about that given, the actual reality on the ground in Yemen at the time?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. I would say that the record of our activities in Yemen from 2011, 2012, until quite recently, in terms of the effectiveness of our unilateral actions against AQAP, as well as the cooperation and the ability of the United States to partner effectively with our counterparts inside of Yemen was positive. And as a result of what we were able to accomplish together, we saw a number of positive developments in terms of taking some of the leadership elements out of AQAP off the table and also forcing AQAP to change its strategy. When the political crisis came in Yemen in 2011, AQAP was able to take advantage of that and increase its territorial control to the extent that they were actually declaring areas of the country to be an Islamic caliphate, not unlike what we see with ISIL in Iraq and Syria these days.

And because of our cooperation, primarily our cooperation with Yemeni security forces, we were able to defeat that at a significant loss of life for AQAP. As a result of that, they changed their tactics. They went back to being a more traditional terrorist organization. They were able to attack locations inside of Sana'a and elsewhere. But the fact of the matter is that we were achieving progress in our ability to pressure them and to keep them on the defensive as opposed to giving them lots of time. And remember, in 2009, in 2010, we saw AQAP mount fairly serious efforts, the underwear bomber and then also the cassette tape effort, to attack the United States. After 2010, they were not able to do that, despite the fact that their intent was still as clear and as strong as it was before.

And so while AQAP was by no means defeated, and continued to be a major threat to security here in the United States, as well as in Yemen and elsewhere around the world, nevertheless, I think that it was legitimate to say that we had achieved some success in the fight against AQAP. Unfortunately, what we are seeing now because of the change in the situation again inside of Yemen is that we are losing some of the gains that we were able to make during that period of 2012 to 2014. And that is why it is so important that we have the ability to get the political negotiations started again so that we can re-establish legitimate government inside of Sana'a that will cooperate with us once again in this fight against violent extremist organizations.

Mr. DESANTIS. Great. My time has expired. I appreciate that. There was a lot there and I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Mr. DeSantis, and I look forward to watching the video of your remarks along with our other vets last night. Congratulations.

I wanted to ask an additional question, so the members can as well. Because of its geographic location, Yemen is so close, just a little short boat ride away from Africa, for example. Eritrea is right there and very unstable. Do you worry about were the movement to take place that the Houthi rebels, ISIL or whatever faction of terrorist organization could very well move their troops a little boat ride away and be in yet another area where they can control that land and destabilize an already troubled region?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. We certainly worried a lot about linkages between particularly the AQAP in Yemen and Shabab in Somalia. And we knew, for example, that Shabab was sending some of their people across to Yemen to receive training and so as you

say, quite correctly, the distances are very short. We are talking about from Yemen to Djibouti, maybe 20 miles by sea. So it is very close by. And it is something that would be of concern to us. And again, as part of our efforts against both AQAP and Shabab, it was something that were trying to monitor and defeat aggressively.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Well, I do worry about it because we have a lot of American personnel, Embassies, consulates, we have a presence throughout that region. So that is a worrisome future development perhaps. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. Mr. Deutch.

Mr. DEUTCH. I just have one more question also. With the coalition focused as it is on the Houthis, and since we have lost at least for now our counterterrorism partner in the Yemeni Government and military, what pressure is there to the extent there is any on al-Qaeda and ISIS as well?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. We, of course, to the extent that we can, it is more limited now, but to the extent that we can we will continue to engage AQAP unilaterally in order to try to disrupt or defeat any threats against us. When Secretary Blinken was in the region, it was also an issue that we raise with the Saudis, in particular, and urged them also as part of their effort to go after AQAP targets as well as other targets so that we can continue the pressure.

Mr. DEUTCH. Can you tell us how that was received?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. They agree, of course, because AQAP is a direct threat to their security, too.

Mr. DEUTCH. And have we seen that happen?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. I can't say for certain, whether we have given them any AQ targets to go after or whether they have been effective in servicing those.

Mr. DEUTCH. I appreciate it. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Mr. Deutch. Mr. Yoho.

Mr. YOH0. Thank you, Madam Chair. Just kind of a follow-up question, with the administration coming out and saying that it is a success over there back in September and they are still touting that as of March 24th or 25th, I have here in an article, how can we be that far off? I know you explained the counterterrorism portion, but yet to have a country taken over while we are sitting there working with them and this happen, I feel it just kind of happened over night, the way our Embassy got run out of town and just say you have to leave, your Marines cannot take their weapons with them. I don't understand how that happens or how we can be that disconnected.

What are your thoughts on that? Is it just denial or is it—I don't know what it is. I am confused because before you answer, it says its counter intuitive claim puzzles national security experts and it says it enrages—it says Republicans, but I am sure it enrages a lot of people. I am just kind of baffled.

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. You know, it was very frustrating. Again, I think that if you go back to where we were a year ago, the successful conclusion of the National Dialogue Conference which was really the last major hurdle in completion of the GCC initiative. Houthis participated in that. They participated in constitutional drafting exercise which was completed successfully. And so we were in the process of moving through all of the require-

ments of the GCC initiative that would allow us to complete successfully the political transition.

I think there were a combination of things. One that there was a view on the part of the Houthis that they were not getting everything that they wanted. They were provoked in our view by Ali Abdallah Saleh who never stopped plotting from the very first day after he signed the agreement on the GCC initiative. He never stopped plotting to try to block the political transition. And there was, to be frank, there was a weakness in the government, an inability on the part of the government to really build the kind of alliances and coalition that would allow them to sustain popular support and to bring this to a successful conclusion.

And so I think that all through this period, there was a sense that we were moving forward and that we believe that we could succeed in implementing this peaceful transition, and yet we always knew that on the margins there were threats and there were risks. And unfortunately, we got to a point where the Houthis and Ali Abdallah Saleh, my personal view is that they recognized that they had reached the last possible moment where they could obstruct the peaceful, political transition that was bad for them because it would mean that they wouldn't get everything that they wanted. And so they saw that time was running out for them and they decided to act and unfortunately, the government was unable to stop them.

Mr. YOHO. I appreciate it. And it just concerns me extremely, a lot, that we are calling this a success and we missed the mark way past the mark. If we are missing this, what else are we missing in our foreign policies?

Can I ask one other thing? We have invested \$900 million since 2011, roughly. It doesn't seem like we have gotten the bang for our buck in our foreign policy. In your opinion, how would you direct foreign policy in a country like Yemen to where we get the results we want?

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. It is a good question. And what I would say is that in a place like Yemen, we have to recognize what the limitations are in those societies. And accept the fact that if we are going to make a difference, it is going to be a very long-term investment on our part. It is unfortunate that Yemen has taken a turn that it has taken. I don't think that the situation is irretrievable. I think that with some effort on our part and the part of the rest of the International Community, we can get it back on track. And then I would hope that we would then stay with it and help the Yemeni people achieve a good outcome. They are good people. They are people who probably deserve a lot better than they have gotten and it would be good if we could a part of the success.

Mr. YOHO. Ambassador, I appreciate your time. Madam Chair, thanks for the indulgence.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much. Thank you, Mr. Yoho.

And Mr. Ambassador, Yemen is a quickly-moving terrain, so we would appreciate if you could keep our subcommittee abreast of any developments. We don't have to have a formal hearing. We can have a meeting in one of the meeting rooms. Thank you for being accessible. There are lots of moving parts and we would like to be abreast of every development. Thank you, sir.

Ambassador FEIERSTEIN. Thank you. It would be my pleasure.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Your testimony was excellent and with that, the subcommittee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:28 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Chairman

April 7, 2015

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held by the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at <http://www.ForeignAffairs.house.gov>):

DATE: Tuesday, April 14, 2015
TIME: 2:00 p.m.
SUBJECT: Yemen Under Attack by Iranian-Backed Houthis
WITNESS: The Honorable Gerald M. Feierstein
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs
U.S. Department of State

By Direction of the Chairman

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.



COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Middle East and North Africa HEARING

Day Tuesday Date 4/14/15 Room 2172

Starting Time 2:00 p.m. Ending Time 3:28 p.m.

Recesses 0 (to) (to) (to) (to) (to) (to)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☒

Televised ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Stenographic Record ☒

TITLE OF HEARING:

Yemen Under Attack by Iranian-Backed Houthis

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Reps. Chabot, Cicilline, Connolly, DeSantis, Deutch, Frankel, Higgins, Meng, Wilson and Yoho.

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)

SFR - Rep. Connolly

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or

TIME ADJOURNED 3:28 p.m.


Subcommittee Staff Director

Statement for the Record
Submitted by Mr. Connolly of Virginia

The crisis in Yemen, which the UN has stated “is getting worse by the hour” has profound implications for our strategy to bring security and stability to the Middle East. Once held up as an example for effective counterterrorism cooperation, Yemen is now engulfed in a full-blown civil war that not only endangers the security of the Arabian Peninsula, but also threatens to give rise to terrorist elements the U.S. has fought so hard to contain.

The situation is a confluence of the most enduring challenges we face in the Middle East. Underlying humanitarian and development deficiencies have created a foothold for sectarian strife, terrorism, and Iranian influence. Further, the crisis is quickly broadening into a conflict between regional powers as Saudi Arabia leads a 10-nation coalition, which includes the U.S., against the Iranian-backed Houthis rebels.

Since the transition of power in 2011 from former President Ali Abdallah Salih to President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the U.S. has committed more than \$800 million in assistance under a revised comprehensive strategy for Yemen. However, U.S. foreign assistance during Yemen’s march to a failed state has been steadily decreasing from \$356 million in FY2012 to \$142 million in FY2014.

It is apparent that diminishing foreign assistance, drone strikes, Section 1206 train and equip funding, and a national dialogue among political elites were not sufficient to address the structural development challenges facing Yemen. Half of the country’s population lives in poverty and suffers from food insecurity, the national unemployment rate is as high as 40%, and the economy is hopelessly undiversified. The government is dependent upon hydrocarbon production for nearly 50% of its revenue, and the country’s oil reserves are estimated to run out between 2017 and 2021. Further, water scarcity is a looming crisis with the capital city, Sana’a, expected to deplete its ground water resources within a decade.

These are the underlying vulnerabilities that have given rise to a Houthi insurgency active since 2004, Al-Qaeda’s most active branch in Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and a vigorous secessionist movement that dredges up unresolved issues from the Yemeni unification in 1990.

This is hardly a situation created by the U.S., but an inability to protect our interests in a country that was once deemed a success story for counterterrorism operations demonstrates that we may be missing the point about stability in the Middle East. A cooperative central government does little for U.S. interests in the face of corruptive outside influence fomenting anger among a populace that struggles to attain basic sustenance. Even the UN-backed National Dialogue

Conference tasked with writing a new constitution and addressing governance issues could not withstand these countervailing pressures.

It is apparent that it is Iran's intention to create multiple claims to power in Yemen. It is a well-worn strategy the Islamic Republic has used elsewhere in the region to create a state within a state. This will undoubtedly lead to instability and allow for the spread of terrorist elements within Yemen. Secretary Kerry has stated that the U.S. will not let Iran destabilize the region and that countries that feel threatened by Iran will have the support of the United States.

Therefore, Yemen will be a test case for our resolve to counter Iranian expansionism, and a military stalemate that brings all parties to the negotiating table will not be sufficient to alter Yemen's trajectory. The U.S. closed its embassy in February 2015 and removed remaining U.S. personnel last month. Our restored presence in Yemen and an earnest development effort will be foundational to stabilizing Yemen and protecting our national security interests in the Arabian Peninsula.

I hope to hear from our witness on how the U.S. plans to address the development and governance challenges in Yemen in a manner that loosens Iran's grip on segments of the population. How does a multilateral effort with our partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council bring Yemen back from the brink of falling into the Iranian sphere without risking a broader regional conflict? Finally, what is the State Department's assessment of Yemen's collapse and its implications for our development strategy in the Middle East? Thank you to the Chairman and Ranking Member for calling this timely hearing on a rapidly deteriorating situation that demands our attention.

